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ABSTRACT

Based on the premise that computer networks are changing the way people think and interact, this Digest discusses some features of electronic discourse as a relatively new form of discourse and examines the current research on computer mediated communication text. The Digest suggests further research on how other features of electronic discourse resemble those of oral and written language and research which compares the construction of reasoning and argument in electronic discourse and conventional writing. It also considers how electronic discourse has brought about new conventions in the use of graphic features and notes that the informal, conversational tone of electronic discourse is quite different from that of traditional academic prose. The Digest points out that as online interaction becomes more widely used in formal academic situations, language educators may have to consider how to respond to the unconventional language use and structuring of ideas. (NKA)

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Electronic Discourse: Evolving Conventions in Online Academic Environments

by Mardziah Hayati Abdullah

Computer networks are changing the way we think and interact. They are redefining the spatial and temporal parameters of the interaction they mediate so that online discourse is taking new directions, particularly in the way people write. One important observation made by a number of researchers is that new conventions are evolving and "blurring the past distinctions between writing and talking" (Tornow, 1997, p.1). Tornow describes the written interaction that occurs in electronic mail and on-line courses, for example, as a kind of "written talk," while Davis and Brewer (1997) use the term *electronic discourse* to refer to written talk - "writing that stands in place of voices" (p. 2).

Some features of electronic discourse

Electronic discourse is a relatively new form of discourse with its own peculiarities. On one hand, it is like conversation in that it "presents a number of performance features generally characteristic of in process or *in situ* [italics added] communicative events and behaviors, such as repetition, direct address, disfluencies, and markers of personal involvement," including syntactic and lexical items (Davis and Brewer, 1997). However, because turn taking occurs differently in computer-mediated communication (CMC), the "interruptions and overlaps so characteristic of conversation" do not occur (p. 3). There is also an absence of the fillers (e.g., uh, er, mmm) so often seen in oral conversations (Brown & Yule, 1983).

Sims (1996) also observed the presence of linguistic features of both written and oral discourse in her study of the social context, formal cues, and linguistic features of electronic mail. Electronic mail, she notes, is deliberate in that the writer has the opportunity to plan and organize the discourse. Yet, it has some of the spontaneity of oral discourse in that most of the users reported spending little time planning and revising electronic mail messages. This spontaneity may be what leads to misspellings and the use of unconventional punctuation, diction, and capitalization in electronic discourse.

In a corpus-based examination of CMC in the United Kingdom, Yates (1996) compared a large corpus of CMC text to speech and writing corpora for several aspects of language use. He found that in terms of *vocabulary use* based on type/token ratios, CMC was more similar to written than spoken language. Chafe and Danielewicz (1987, p. 88) claim that speakers, in contrast to writers, produce language "on the fly" and therefore tend to use the first words that occur to them, the result being that the vocabulary of spoken language is more limited in variety. Secondly, CMC was also more like written than spoken language in terms of *lexical density*. According to Yates, CMC users "package information in text in ways that are more written- than speech-like" because they may be exhibiting what Zuboff calls the "textualization of sociality", where they bring their "literate production practices to an interactive, social and orally-oriented interaction" (Yates, 1996, p. 39). Another feature Yates studied was first, second, and third person *pronoun use*. In terms of overall frequency of pronoun use, his CMC sample was more similar to written language than it was to spoken, much higher levels of such pronoun use being observed in spoken discourse than in the other two. However, the CMC sample was quite different from writing in the way pronouns of each type were distributed, there being greater similarity between CMC and speech in first and second person pronoun use. Finally, Yates' study looked at the use of modal auxiliaries in the three corpora. The results showed that the usage of modals on CMC was significantly higher than that of speech and writing, with writing having the lowest usage of all three. In addition, CMC differed significantly from both speech and writing in all cases of modals except epistemic possibility (e.g. may, might), but the overall relative frequencies of modal usage are most similar between speech and CMC.

Further research could examine how other features of electronic discourse resemble those of oral and written language, such as those pointed out by Brown & Yule. Examples are incomplete sentences (often sequences of phrases), and little subordination like that found in spoken language, compared to the high number of what Walters (in Farr, 1993) calls "hypotactic," heavily subordinated sentences in academic writing. There is a strong tendency to structure short chunks of speech so that only one predicate is attached to a referent at a time, whereas in written language, information related to a particular referent can be concentrated in heavily modified noun phrases. There are also more active declaration forms in spoken language vs. passives, it-clefts or wh-clefts.

Besides examining linguistic features, studies could also compare the construction of reasoning and argument in electronic discourse and conventional writing. While written talk often seems to represent sporadic and incoherent attempts at engaging in intellectual academic discussion, Resnick, et.al. (1993, p.363) point

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CS 505 847

out that such an impression may be "conditioned by textbook norms of elegant, carefully structured arguments."

New conventions

Electronic discourse has also brought about new conventions in the use of graphic features. The functions performed by voice quality, intonation and pauses in speech have traditionally been performed by capitalization, punctuation, italicization, and paragraphing in written language (Brown & Yule, 1983, p. 10-11). In addition to these, writers of e-mail and other forms of electronic discourse not only utilize punctuation and all-capital letters to signal humor, irony, or intimacy, but have also created *emoticons* (e.g., :-) and :-p) for those purposes (Wilkins, 1991; Davis & Brewer, 1997).

Tornow points out two other features that may eventually characterize written talk. The first is the possible occurrence of new metaphors related to computer-mediated language use, based on her assumption that computer mediation introduces new metaphors into our thinking. The second feature is the possible borrowing of terms from different disciplines, occurring as conversations across disciplines becomes more accessible through networking.

Emerging issues

As online environments increasingly become channels for interaction in educational situations, academic discussion is characteristically taking on the features of written talk. Although ideas and arguments are still being presented in written form, the discourse takes on an informal, conversational tone quite different from that of traditional academic prose or essayist literacy as defined by Scollon & Scollon (1981) and Farr (1993). The following is an example of a message posted by a graduate student in response to an on-line discussion on the definition of Reading:

> *"the example I gave of my son reading oratory is of course not reading. Not really. Because there is no or little comprehension. Comprehension is a necessary ingerdient. At least a certain amount of comprehension...the gist of the thing at least."*
>
> (Personal communication, March 1998)

The use of lower case at the start of the first sentence, the short phrases, the incomplete sentence, the uncorrected spelling mistake, and the informal tone are more representative of a chunk of oral conversation than it is part of a written exchange of academic ideas. Yet, as conversations with online course instructors indicate, such postings are considered evidence of students' critical reasoning, intellectual growth and thoughtful contribution to a topic of discussion, and assessed as such. Geisler (1994) suggests that two kinds of knowledge make up academic expertise: "knowledge of the content domain of [a] discipline and knowledge of the discipline's rhetorical processes" (p. 144). Online instructors are thus, in effect, judging how effectively students can communicate meaning using the situational rhetoric of written talk, the conventions of which differ noticeably from those of traditional academic writing.

As online interaction becomes more widely used in formal academic situations, and as more students of all age levels participate in electronic discourse, language educators may have to consider how to respond to such unconventional language use and structuring of ideas. Should those changes be met with acceptance or should they be redressed? A manual entitled Wired Style: Principles of English Usage in the Digital Age edited by Hale (1996) confronts this concern, addressing questions such as "When does jargon end and vernacular begin?", "Where's the line between neologism and hype?", and "What's the language of the global village?". In addition to examining the language itself, and perhaps more importantly, we need to understand how these changing conventions may be contributing to the construction of online learning communities and the development of online academic discourse. With more educational institutions using CMC as an alternative or sole means of interaction, the time has come for language educators to make this effort.

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